

JENNIFER DAY TOPE

## Fighting the Second World War in Paradise with a Bat and Glove: Major League Baseball Comes to Hawai‘i

Well—it’s our game; that’s the chief fact in connection with it; America’s game; it has the snap, go, fling of the American atmosphere; it belongs as much to our institutions; fits into them as significantly as our Constitution’s laws; is just as important in the sum total of our historic life.<sup>1</sup>

—Walt Whitman

At the time of the Second World War, baseball was truly America’s national pastime and was in its “Golden Age.”<sup>2</sup> The Feather River *Bulletin* of Plumas County, California declared that baseball was “more than a National Game. It is an American anchor.”<sup>3</sup>

When the United States entered World War II in 1941, Major League Baseball felt the effects with nearly 400 ballplayers leaving the game to serve in the military, 90 percent of those who were in the majors when the United States entered the war.<sup>4</sup> The minor leagues

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*The Hawaiian Journal of History*, vol. 42 (2008)

were hit even harder. With more than 4,000 players in the service, some of the smaller leagues were forced to suspend play for the duration of the war.<sup>5</sup>

The first player to enlist for military service after the United States entered the war was eventual Hall of Famer Bob Feller. He was at the peak of his career, and exempt from the draft, when he joined the Navy just two days after the attack on Pearl Harbor. He summed up the feelings of many ballplayers when he stated why he joined the Navy:

I thought at that particular time that we were losing real big. We'd just lost 3,000 men at Pearl Harbor; 1,500 on one ship. We were losing big in Europe. And if you were gonna do anything for your country, it was about time to get busy. I thought there were more important things to do than be a baseball player.<sup>6</sup>

Hank Greenberg had been released from the Army two days before Pearl Harbor was hit. Immediately after the attack he reenlisted in the Army, giving up the \$50,000 a year he made playing baseball. He explained at the time of his enlistment:

We are in trouble and there is only one thing for me to do—return to the service . . . This doubtless means I am finished with baseball, and it would be silly for me to say I do not leave it without a pang. But all of us are confronted with a terrible task—the defense of our country and the fight of our lives.<sup>7</sup>

Because many players left for military service and the need for men to fight was so great, Baseball Commissioner Kennesaw Mountain Landis asked President Franklin Roosevelt if Major League Baseball should shut down for the duration of the war. In what became known as the “green light” letter Roosevelt replied:

I honestly feel that it would be best for the country to keep baseball going. . . . everybody will work longer hours and harder than ever before. And that means that they ought to have a chance for recreation and for taking their minds off their work even more than before. . . .  
. . . As to the players themselves I know you agree with me that indi-

vidual players who are of active military or naval age should go, without question, into the services.<sup>8</sup>

Though he did support baseball's continued play, he encouraged men to join the services.<sup>9</sup> Some players were drafted into service and others joined willingly, though the public and press did put considerable pressure on the players to volunteer. Baseball continued throughout the war, but the quality of play suffered significantly as more and more players entered military service. For example, the St. Louis Browns, the only team never to win a pennant before the war, infamously won the pennant in 1944 with a team that included a one-armed outfielder and a midget.<sup>10</sup> Yet in Hawai'i, things were quite different. Ultimately, World War II would provide O'ahu with the best baseball the island has ever seen, and arguably the best baseball that was played anywhere during the war.

Due to baseball's intense popularity at the time of the Second World War, the war brought plentiful numbers of baseball lovers into the United States armed forces and military leaders realized that baseball could be a morale booster. The services organized participatory baseball programs and informal pickup games at bases throughout the world in an effort to use baseball's popularity to the advantage of the military. The Army and Navy established a program to train military leaders on how to organize and promote athletic programs for the armed forces. These programs were especially important in the first few months of service when men were adjusting to life in uniform, as well as during periods of inactivity when they were more likely to become homesick or bored, and possibly get into trouble. In addition, these programs provided some degree of physical fitness, as well as keeping many other skills sharp, such as quickness of decision, promptness of action, and mental and muscle coordination.<sup>11</sup> The games helped instill "camaraderie, leadership qualities and quick, decisive thinking."<sup>12</sup> Many ballplayers spent their time in the service in these programs. In the spring of 1944, for example, 300 of 350 ballplayers in the military were still serving in the United States, and most were playing baseball.<sup>13</sup> While some professional ballplayers joined the military and found themselves on the field of battle, storming the beaches of Normandy during the D-Day invasion or resisting the

German onslaught at the Battle of the Bulge, many others served their country by playing baseball. Red Sox pitcher Tex Hughson spoke for many when he said, "I fought World War II with a bat and glove."<sup>14</sup>

The military primarily used ballplayers as physical fitness instructors and had them play baseball games on service teams to entertain the general public and the troops to boost morale on U.S. military bases around the world. Military teams were loaded with professional baseball talent and some service teams were as good or better than teams playing in the major leagues during the war. The teams at the Great Lakes Naval Training Station near Chicago played exhibition games against major league teams and often beat them.<sup>15</sup> Hawaiian military bases also stood out as having some of the best teams in the world in the last years of the war.

The military first began to send baseball stars to Hawai'i at the end of 1943, when the islands were deemed safe from attacks by Japanese forces.<sup>16</sup> The Army had already amassed a great deal of baseball talent in Hawai'i by the end of 1943, but the Navy did not send their best until late 1944 when military baseball became extremely competitive between the Army and Navy.<sup>17</sup> Sailor Barney McCosky, star outfielder for the Detroit Tigers, said:

... one night our names were called over the loudspeaker. The next day we were aboard the *U.S.S. Birmingham* and we were on our way to Hawaii. Did the Navy purposely put its best ballplayers in Hawaii? Oh, yeah. That's for sure. ... In our baseball league in Hawaii, we also had Aiea Hospital, Kaneohe Bay airbase, and Pearl Harbor submarine base.<sup>18</sup>

Future Hall of Famers Joe Dimaggio, Stan Musial, Harold "Pee Wee" Reese, and Ted Williams were just a few of the players stationed in Hawai'i during the Second World War. Overall approximately one third of the professional baseball players serving in the military ended up in Hawai'i competing on military teams.

Joe Dimaggio was perhaps the biggest legend to play in Hawai'i during the war. As the United States entered the war and thousands of Americans enlisted to fight, fans began to pressure Dimaggio to join the service, calling him a "draft dodger" and even booing him at Yankee Stadium.<sup>19</sup> Concerned about public opinion, Dimaggio joined the



military in February 1942, and like most of his fellow players, asked that he receive no special treatment. In fact, in 1943 he demanded combat duty because he was concerned that the public would think he was avoiding his duty and he “didn’t enlist to play baseball.”<sup>20</sup> When he left for the service, he was at the peak of his career with the New York Yankees and had recently set a baseball record with his historic 56-game hitting streak; a record that still stands today.<sup>21</sup> Because of his status as a national hero, Dimaggio’s safety became a military priority. He was initially sent to California, but in 1944, when the military was sending more ballplayers to Hawai’i, Dimaggio was among those sent.<sup>22</sup> On June 3, 1944, the same day the Allies were preparing for D-Day, Joe DiMaggio and 16 other big leaguers arrived on O’ahu.

The day after arriving, Dimaggio began playing for the 7th Army Air Force team. During his first game with the team, the Yankee Clipper thrilled the 21,000 fans on hand by hitting a dramatic 435 foot homerun, one of the longest hit at Honolulu Stadium.<sup>23</sup> The *Honolulu Advertiser* proclaimed that, “. . . coming to Hawaii fulfilled a long-desired ambition for Joe and the others who dreamed of a tiny islet with hula girls and life as pictured by the tourist bureau.



The 7th Army Air Force Baseball team at Hickam Field, Hawai’i, in 1944. Annotations identify the players by row. Joe DiMaggio is the third player from the left in the back row. Private collection of Gary Bedingfield.

All agreed . . . that what little they have seen of the island is far from disappointing.”<sup>24</sup>

Despite the claims of the local newspaper, DiMaggio was not happy to come to Hawai‘i and did not enjoy his time on O‘ahu for many reasons. He had been pressured by public opinion to join the Army and hated that he was playing baseball for the Army and only making \$50.00 a month doing it, when he could have been making significantly more playing for the Yankees. He was at the peak of his career yet he was not spending his prime years with the Yankees. Lastly, health problems plagued him and he was often hospitalized with stomach ailments.<sup>25</sup> His condition eventually led to his transfer back to the mainland in October 1944.<sup>26</sup>

While in Hawai‘i, Dimaggio and the other players enjoyed a number of special privileges, such as gifts from generals and passes whenever they were requested.<sup>27</sup> The players were also fed so well that when Dimaggio was in the Army, he was ten pounds heavier than his usual weight<sup>28</sup> and the main battle hazard was probably cirrhosis.<sup>29</sup> Dimaggio and the other baseball stars would:

. . . loll in the sand and surf, get a tan, drink some beer, tell some lies. When the boys were properly toasted, or on those rare days when the weather wasn’t postcard-perfect, they might hang around their Quonset huts playing cards.<sup>30</sup>

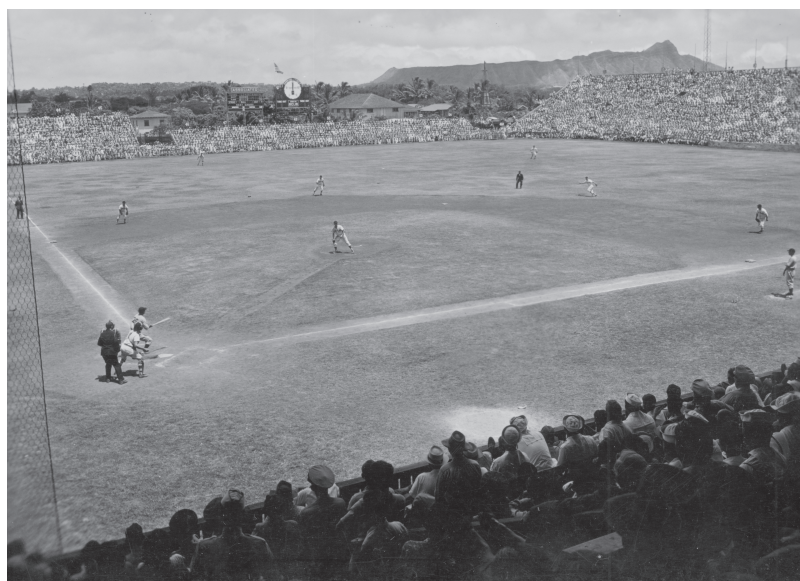
Baseball players did not generally lead the life of the typical soldiers and sailors, though the Army claimed that at the games they wanted “no special emphasis placed on the appearance of Dimaggio & Co.” and told fans to display their excitement “in the regular manner with no extra blowing of horns and ballyhoo.”<sup>31</sup>

Ted Williams was another legend of the era whose military service brought him to Hawai‘i. Before joining the Navy, Williams was one of the best hitters in baseball, hitting .406 in 1941, a feat that has not been matched since. After the 1942 season, Williams left baseball and volunteered to serve in the Marine Corps, where he proved to be a gifted fighter pilot and spent far less time on the baseball diamond than most ballplayers due to his focus on military duties. After training, Williams was sent to Japan for combat duty, but the war ended

while he was en route to Asia via Hawai'i, and he spent the next few months on O'ahu playing in the 14th Naval District League.

On September 17, 1945 Williams made his debut with the Marine Flyers.<sup>32</sup> Mel Brookey, a minor leaguer and teammate on the Flyers, described Williams' impact on the team, "We were in ninth place . . . then Ted Williams joined us in the middle of the season. We became a little better, if you know what I mean."<sup>33</sup> Brookey described his encounters with the great ballplayers he was so privileged to be playing with:

I'll never forget DiMaggio hit a liner down third base against us. Our third baseman leaped, and the ball went right between his bare hand and his glove. The ball was hit so hard it went all the way to the fence in left on the fly. The fence was painted Army green. The ball had to be thrown out of play because it took some paint off. . . . Musial, we played against him, he hit four doubles against us. They all were off the right-



Baseball game between the Navy and 7th Army Air Force teams at Honolulu Stadium in 1944. Bernice Pauahi Bishop Museum.

centerfield fence, and they all hit within two feet of each other. . . . Ted? Ted hit some massive home runs. The parks were all small, and he hit shots that looked like golf balls flying over the fence.<sup>34</sup>

Scores of other professional ballplayers were shuffled in and out of Hawai'i. There were numerous military baseball teams and virtually all had major league and minor league talent—many had a future Hall of Famer. Due to the high quality of play, attendance at the games was over a million during the course of the war.

In September 1944, O'ahu hosted the "Serviceman's World Series," arranged by Navy Admiral Chester Nimitz and Army Lieutenant General Robert Richardson, Jr. The series determined the service championship of the Pacific region, in addition to the entire country.<sup>35</sup> Simply intended to be a morale booster for the troops stationed in Hawai'i, the games became very competitive. Arguably this was the most important military baseball event of the war.<sup>36</sup> The Army team included greats such as Joe Dimaggio and Hank Greenberg and was the initial favorite to win the Series. Unfortunately for the Army, Dimaggio and Greenberg were sidelined during the series and Admiral Chester Nimitz quickly gathered a magnificent Navy team. The "Navy put together—on three days' notice—one of the great baseball teams of all time."<sup>37</sup> Two days before the first game of the series:

'A Naval Air Transport plane' carrying 'a sorely-needed shipment of plumbing equipment' arrived, 'supervised by two sailors, one a chief named Dom Dimaggio, the other a bluejacket by the name of Phil Rizzuto.' Shortly thereafter, another Navy plane landed in Hawaii, this time with cargo that included 'sailors with names like Rowe, Trucks, Walter Masterson, [and] Johnny Vander Meer.'<sup>38</sup>

The Navy team already had several stars, including Pee Wee Reese, and was managed by future Yankee manager Bill Dickey, so the additional help made them nearly unbeatable. The loaded Navy team won the first game of the series five to zero with the help of Virgil Trucks' pitching and Phil Rizzuto's three hits.<sup>39</sup> They went on to win the Service World Series with four straight wins. The teams had pledged to play seven games regardless of the outcome of the initial games. They not only did that, but they played a total of 11 games with the Navy

winning nine. The Navy's strong pitching and hitting was too much for the Army to overcome, as many predicted before the series even began.<sup>40</sup>

The Army was defeated so badly that they sent more talent to Hawai'i hoping to defeat the Navy. Future Hall of Famer Enos Slaughter was among those sent. He said:

The Navy was beating the hell out of the Army in Honolulu. Larry MacPhail was working with the government then in Washington, and he got every major league player in the whole United States who was in the Army Air Corps. In seven days' time I had my orders. . . . There were



Hall of Fame Players Joe DiMaggio and Pee Wee Reese Participating in the 1944 "Serviceman's World Series." Navy Admiral Chester Nimitz and Army Lieutenant General Robert Richardson Jr. sponsored the series. DiMaggio, on the left, was on the 7th Army Air Force team and Reese, in the "Aiea" jersey, played for the Navy team.



forty-eight of us. . . . When we got over there, [to Hawaii] it was too late; all the Navy was gone and the Marines were gone.<sup>41</sup>

By the time he had arrived, Pee Wee Reese, Johnny Mize, Johnny Vander Meer, and many of the other Navy baseball stars had departed for a tour to entertain American troops around the Pacific.<sup>42</sup>

The picks for the Navy All-Star team of 1945 demonstrate just how great baseball was in Hawai'i during the war. Of the nine picked in that single year, three were future Hall of Famers—Stan Musial, Billy Herman, and Bob Lemon. The *Honolulu Advertiser* declared:

If the major league club owners, fans, and managers feel that the quality of the 1945 pennant races was a little below par, 14 excellent reasons for a falling off in the caliber of play may be had by a study of the 14th Naval District baseball league all-star team, which is enough to cause a wistful gleam in any big league pilot's eyes.<sup>43</sup>

The final highlight of Hawai'i wartime baseball was the all-Navy "world series" that was played in late September and early October 1945. In the series, the Navy's best players from the National League played the greatest stars from the American League. The American League team included such greats as Johnny Pesky, Stan Musial, and Ted Williams. Williams had not played nearly as much ball as his teammates during the war and he said just prior to the series, "I'm still a little rusty but I hope to be ready for this big series. I think every man on our squad is anxious to win . . . It should be quite a series." Some claimed that the baseball played in this series would be better than the 1945 World Series since many of the best players were in Hawai'i.<sup>44</sup> The games were played at Furlong Field at Pearl Harbor and often had crowds of nearly 30,000. The American League stars were expected to take the series, but the National League won a close series four games to three. The series would be the last time Hawai'i would see major league players on a regular basis. As the war came to an end, so did the military leagues, and one by one the major league players began to leave O'ahu.

Though baseball has long been popular in Hawai'i, few remember that O'ahu enjoyed some of the best baseball in the country during the Second World War. While most of the United States settled for sub-par Major League Baseball that was lacking much of its talent,

Hawai'i saw numerous future Hall of Famers on a regular basis. Islanders were able to watch outstanding performances throughout much of the war on a small island in the Pacific far removed from professional baseball.

#### NOTES

- <sup>1</sup> Ken Burns, "My Favorite Baseball Photograph," *American Heritage*, October (1994) 92.
- <sup>2</sup> Steven R. Bullock, *Playing for Their Nation: Baseball and the American Military during World War II* (Lincoln, NE & London: U of Nebraska P, 2004) 1.
- <sup>3</sup> Geoffrey Ward with Ken Burns, *Baseball: An Illustrated History* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1994) 276.
- <sup>4</sup> Bullock, *Playing for Their Nation*, 77.
- <sup>5</sup> William B. Mead, *Baseball Goes to War* (Washington, D.C.: Broadcast Interview Source, Inc., 1998) 239.
- <sup>6</sup> Ken Burns (director), *Baseball: A Film By Ken Burns*, DVD (Washington, DC: Florentine Films, The Baseball Film Project, 1994).
- <sup>7</sup> Mead, *Baseball Goes to War*, 32.
- <sup>8</sup> Ward with Burns, *Illustrated History*, 276–277.
- <sup>9</sup> Ward with Burns, *Illustrated History*, 276–277.
- <sup>10</sup> Mead, *Baseball Goes to War*, xi.
- <sup>11</sup> Bullock, *Playing for Their Nation*, 8.
- <sup>12</sup> Bullock, *Playing for Their Nation*, 9.
- <sup>13</sup> Glenn Stout, *Yankees Century: 100 Years of New York Yankees Baseball* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 2002) 196.
- <sup>14</sup> Stout, *Yankees Century*, 196.
- <sup>15</sup> Stout, *Yankees Century*, 196.
- <sup>16</sup> Bullock, *Playing for Their Nation*, 92.
- <sup>17</sup> Bullock, *Playing for Their Nation*, 93.
- <sup>18</sup> Mead, *Baseball Goes to War*, 195.
- <sup>19</sup> Bullock, *Playing for Their Nation*, 100.
- <sup>20</sup> "Sports Service Record," *Yank: The Army Weekly*, 12 Sept. 1943, 18; quoted in Bullock, *Playing for Their Nation*, 101.
- <sup>21</sup> Mike Mancuso, "Joe Dimaggio," <http://history.acusd.edu/gen/ww2Timeline/dimaggio3.html> (accessed 8 March 2006).
- <sup>22</sup> Mancuso, "Joe Dimaggio."
- <sup>23</sup> *HA*, 5 June 1944.
- <sup>24</sup> *HA*, 6 June 1944.
- <sup>25</sup> Richard Ben Cramer, *Joe Dimaggio: The Hero's Life* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2000) 211–213.
- <sup>26</sup> Mancuso, "Joe Dimaggio."
- <sup>27</sup> Bullock, *Playing for Their Nation*, 100.

<sup>28</sup> Bullock, *Playing for Their Nation*, 100.

<sup>29</sup> Cramer, *Joe Dimaggio*, 212–214.

<sup>30</sup> Cramer, *Joe Dimaggio*, 212.

<sup>31</sup> *HSB*, 3 June 1944.

<sup>32</sup> *HA*, 18 Sept. 1945.

<sup>33</sup> Leigh Montville, *Ted Williams: The Biography of an American Hero* (New York: Doubleday, 2004) 117.

<sup>34</sup> Montville, *Ted Williams*, 118.

<sup>35</sup> *HA*, 22 Sept. 1944.

<sup>36</sup> Bullock, *Playing for Their Nation*, 23.

<sup>37</sup> Jim Britt, “The Year the Navy Won the World Series,” *Downtown Athletic Club News* (April 1969): 67–68, quoted in Bullock, *Playing for Their Nation*, 23.

<sup>38</sup> Britt, “The Year the Navy Won the World Series,” quoted in Bullock, *Playing for Their Nation*, 23–4.

<sup>39</sup> *HA*, 23 Sept. 1944.

<sup>40</sup> *HA*, 22 Sept. 1944.

<sup>41</sup> Mead, *Baseball Goes to War*, 197.

<sup>42</sup> Mead, *Baseball Goes to War*, 198.

<sup>43</sup> *HA*, 26 Sept. 1945.

<sup>44</sup> *HA*, 25 Sept. 1945.